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TAGS: PGOV KDEM OAS GY
SUBJECT: SUBJECT: GUYANA ELECTION: FREE, FAIR AND
TRANSPARENT?

REF: A. GEORGETOWN 860

1B. GEORGETOWN 855
1C. GEORGETOWN 854

Classified By: AMBASSADOR DAVID M. ROBINSON FOR REASON 1.4(B)

11. (SBU) SUMMARY: Guyana's 2006 national and regional elections: free, somewhat fair, but not transparent. International observers agree that: (1) the elections were technically a success; (2) proper procedures were followed at polling places in the subsequent vote count. However, there are long-standing problems with the fairness and transparency of Guyana's electoral process, including the People's Progressive Party's (PPP/C) use of government resources -- including state run media and tax authorities - to support its campaign. Likewise, the total exclusion of the public from the regulatory decision-making processes regarding the conduct of the election and an electoral system in which the public do not know which individuals they are choosing to represent them in Parliament result in a poor grade for transparency. END SUMMARY.

VOTING PROCESS WAS FREE

12. (SBU) By final count, more than 336,000 Guyanese cast votes at approximately 2000 polling places in the August 28 national and regional elections. Aside from a few minor glitches - mostly issues regarding voter identification and/or location of correct polling place - national and international election observers agreed that Guyana's 2006 elections were a success. With more than 120 international observers (OAS, Commonwealth, CARICOM, Carter Center) and approximately 1200 local Election Assistance Bureau (EAB) observers well as polling agents from at least two parties at nearly every polling station, the integrity of the voting process was watched with great detail. Shortly after the polls closed, the accolades began flowing in:

-- OAS A/SYG Albert Ramdin released a statement on August 29 declaring that "reports from OAS observers throughout the day

indicated that the General and Regional Elections took place in a calm, professional and orderly manner."

-- In a follow up press release, the OAS declared that the elections were "exemplary" and that they will long be remembered for their historical value and for setting an inspirational basis for changes to come.

-- The Carter Center issued a press release on August 31 commending the people of Guyana, the political parties and GECOM for "what so far has been the most peaceful and orderly electoral process in recent history."

-- The Commonwealth Observer Group endorsed the voting process, proclaiming that there was no interference or manipulation during the process and that conditions existed at the elections for "a free expression of will of the electors and the results reflected their wishes."

-- The Central Islamic Organization of Guyana issued a statement praising the election process and thanking GECOM for "conducting elections in a peaceful and transparent manner.

-- US Embassy staff, serving as volunteer election observers in most parts of the country, reported that voting procedures were followed and that no major problems occurred at the polling places.

PPP'S USE OF GOVERNMENT RESOURCES IMPEDES FAIRNESS

¶3. (SBU) The fairness of the electoral process was hindered by the PPP/C's use of government resources to tilt the

playing field. As the ruling party, they had an unfair advantage in regard to both the quantity and quality of media exposure during the elections. Radio is the only form of electronic media that reaches most parts of Guyana's interior. The only licensed radio station in Guyana is controlled by the PPP/C led government, which used this monopoly control to its advantage. The government also controls a network of television stations that covers most of the coast. The PPP/C used this media advantage to, among other things, air pro-party documentaries for months, including the night before the election, and to constantly bombard cricket match viewers with pictures of President Jagdeo during the contest. In another example of misuse of government resources, the PPP/C-run media tripled the cost for political advertisements during the month before the election, while keeping constant the rates for commercial ads, effectively denying access to less well-funded parties. In private meetings with election observers, Jagdeo and his senior ministers admitted that their "Cabinet Outreach" program was purely a state-funded campaign activity. The PPP/C's misuse of government resources went as far as political-related tax audits - the leaders of both the Alliance for Change (AFC) and Guyana Action Party-Rise Organize and Rebuild Guyana (GAP-ROAR) reported that they were queried or audited by the Guyana Revenue Authority in the run-up to the election.

LACK OF TRANSPARENCY A CONCERN

¶4. (SBU) Although Guyana's national and regional elections were an overall success, issues concerning lack of transparency in the process did arise. First, most of GECOM's decisions regarding the election were discussed and decided in closed meetings. This lack of transparency left voters guessing as to how, exactly, the decisions were made and who, ultimately, was responsible for making them. The constitutional selection process for Parliament members is opaque. After learning how many seats their party has won, the party leaders than pick and choose names from the electoral list to represent their party in Parliament. The

selection mechanism is closed to all other than the inner-circle of party faithful. The two major parties presented electoral lists with far more names than the total number of seats in Parliament. Thus, even if the PPP/C or PNC/R-1G had won 100% of the vote and all 65 seats in Parliament, the electorate still would not know which individuals would end up representing them in Parliament. Lastly, the number of Parliament seats awarded to each contesting party is calculated through a confusing constitutional formula that left most observers (as well as candidates) dumbfounded as to whether the resulting distribution was correct. The Chief Electoral Officer apparently did not get it correct when explaining the system to the national media, and none of the candidates or senior party leaders EmbOffs spoke with were able to come to agreement on how seats are supposed to be distributed. From a transparency standpoint, Guyana's voting laws need to be re-written so that even the public can understand them.

COMMENT

15. (C) As former President Carter has remarked, Guyana does not need help counting ballots. This election was as free as the last three elections since 1992. The problems with fairness and transparency are also largely the same as those in the 1992, 1997, and 2001 elections. The peaceful and orderly electoral process at least is one positive sign that the political system is beginning to mature. The violence and constitutional crisis brought on by the last few elections has, at least temporarily, been replaced by a functioning electoral process and a smooth transition into the next five years.

Robinson